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Blaney, Aileen

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# All's Fair in Love and War?

## Representations of Prison Life in *Silent Grace*

Aileen Blaney

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**ABSTRACT** This article investigates the textual strategies with which Maeve Murphy's *Silent Grace* addresses viewers in contemporary Northern Ireland. Borrowing Eric Santner's concept of 'narrative fetishism', the analysis examines how the film's representation of the past obscures the historical realities experienced by female political prisoners in Armagh jail in the late 1970s and early 1980s. From this standpoint, its ethical relation to historical 'truth' and responsibilities to its local audience are debated.

**KEY WORDS** audience ♦ ethics ♦ female political prisoners ♦ history ♦ narrative fetishism ♦ Northern Ireland

The newsworthiness of prison protests conducted by republican prisoners in Northern Ireland from 1976 into the early years of the 1980s earned their passage to television screens and newspapers around the world. With the conclusion of the 1981 hunger strikes, however, republican prison protests disappeared from the headlines. That is not to say that these protests – which ranged from no-wash campaigns to hunger strikes – have been completely forgotten. On the contrary, they have oftentimes been revisited in academic literature, political pamphlets, as well as in speeches by republican figures in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Furthermore, the deaths of 10 men who went on hunger strike in the Maze prison in 1981 have been commemorated in murals across Northern Ireland. Many of these murals draw from religious iconography of suffering to stress the heroic sacrifices made by Bobby Sands, who was elected from prison as an MP to Westminster for Fermanagh and South Tyrone shortly before his death, and the nine other men who died on the same hunger strike. Taking the extent of discursive attention dedicated to prisoners in the Maze and their

subsequent celebration through murals into account, female republican prisoners in Armagh jail, who also used their bodies as tools of political protest during this same period in Northern Irish history, have been marginalized in the news media, as well as in political and visual culture. Confinement, on a whole, of detailed analyses of their campaigns of resistance to feminist writings suggests an anxiety shared by the media, mainstream historical discourse and Irish republicanism provoked by the abjection of the female body.

With the quasi-invisibility of female prison protestors in the above domains, *Silent Grace* (dir. Maeve Murphy, 2001) – a film based on the political resistance of republican women prisoners in Armagh jail, in Northern Ireland, in 1980 – might be welcomed for its potential to redress their historical marginalization. However, despite the easing of government and self-censorship in the broadcast media in Ireland and the UK subsequent to the successes of the peace process, and the positive repercussions of these developments for the conditions of filmmaking, *Silent Grace's* illustration of the redemptive powers of romantic love and friendship does not reflect the radical nature of these changes.<sup>1</sup> By obfuscating the historical reality of the women's prison experiences, the film demonstrates 'the general problem of narrative film', which Alexander Kluge succinctly describes as the problem of 'how to get a happy ending without lying' (Hansen, 2001: 131). The filmic narrative's tendencies in this regard might be defined in terms of 'narrative fetishism', a concept that Eric Santner derives from psychoanalytic theory. He describes it as:

... a strategy whereby one seeks voluntaristically to reinstate the pleasure principle without addressing and working through those other tasks which, as Freud insists, 'must be accomplished before the dominance of the pleasure principle can even begin'. Far from providing a symbolic space for the reconstruction of anxiety, narrative fetishism directly or indirectly offers reassurances that there was no need for anxiety in the first place. (Santner, 1992: 147)

Implicit in the film's narrative fetishism is the assumption that the greater the narrative's attention to the vicissitudes or displeasures of history, the less it will yield in 'pleasure' or entertainment value. Presuming this to be the case, the film fails to honour an ethical responsibility either to its historical subjects or to its viewers situated in post-conflict Northern Ireland – a society attempting to come to terms with the recent past – to remember historical trauma 'properly' (Žižek, 2002: 22).

#### A SHORT HISTORY OF THE HUNGER STRIKES

The seeds of prisoners' discontent alluded to in *Silent Grace* were sown in the mid-1970s subsequent to the British government's launching of a

propaganda war aimed at depoliticizing the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and arresting growing levels of popular support for militant republicanism in Northern Ireland. While the propaganda war would assume various guises at different stages of the 'troubles', at the historical juncture concerned, the policy of criminalization – enacted through rhetoric and legislation – was central to the government's strategy of normalization, or of delegitimizing republican prisoners. Government statements borrowed terminology such as 'the Godfathers of crime' from popular culture to refer to IRA leaders as part of its effort to associate them with a criminal underworld and to groom a Northern Irish public for impending legislative reform. In 1976, the British government removed the category of political prisoner from the statute books. By abolishing 'special category status', which applied to individuals imprisoned for paramilitary related offences, they nullified the legislative differentiation between political and criminal prisoners.<sup>2</sup> This type of legislative reform was designed to impede the IRA from correlating their struggle with their republican forefathers, not least those who died during the 1916 Rising, and from presenting the armed struggle in the North as part of a historical continuum of Irish self-determination.

The British government could not, however, have anticipated the extremity of republican prisoners' resolve to retain political status and were consequently ill equipped to deal with the intensity and nature of prison protests organized in opposition to criminalization. Determined to reclaim their political status, republican prisoners in Northern Ireland's jails spent several years 'on the blanket', engaged in 'no-work protests' and 'no-wash protests', and undertook the infamous 'dirty protest'.<sup>3</sup> While women prisoners in Armagh jail could wear their own clothes, and so had no cause to go 'on the blanket', their objections to state policy with regard to political prisoners and the prison officers' treatment of them led to their participation in protests mirroring those of their male counterparts, with the distinction that their female bodily functions supplied them with menstrual in addition to 'excremental ink' (Ellmann, 1993: 105) and heightened their vulnerability to disease and sterility. In October 1980, seven prisoners in the Maze began a hunger strike, believing it to be the sole course of action available to them should they wish to continue their resistance to the state's concerted efforts to vitiate their political worth.<sup>4</sup> Several weeks later, three women in the female wing of Armagh prison organized a concurrent hunger strike. Towards the end of December, the strike was called off owing to overtures by the British authorities that the strikers' demands would be conceded. However, another hunger strike was planned after the British government reneged on its promise to allow the prisoners to wear their own clothes when it distributed civilian-style prison-issue clothing.

Before events in the Maze and in Armagh jail, there were already strong links between the tradition of prison hunger strikes and Irish nationalism.

Terence MacSwiney – Lord Mayor of Cork in 1920 – became immortalized in Irish nationalist history after he died in Brixton prison on day 74 of his hunger strike. A section from his inauguration speech – in which he stated: 'It is not those who can inflict the most, but those who can suffer the most who will conquer' (CAIN, 2008) – was recalled during the 1981 hunger strike in the H-Block of the Maze prison. It is noteworthy that while republican discourse during this period invoked the lineage of hunger strikers in Irish history, female exponents of the practice were rarely mentioned. And this, despite the fact that immediately following the civil war, Mary MacSwiney, the imprisoned sister of republican martyr Terence MacSwiney, expressed her opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 by going on hunger strike. MacSwiney's action galvanized opposition to the government and Cumann na mBan enjoyed mass public support during their marches on Mountjoy jail and government offices (Sweeney, 1993). Pleas for her release came from political figures at home and abroad, and despite the Roman Catholic church's official denouncement of the practice as suicide, Archbishop Mannix of Australia urged Irish Catholics to 'support MacSwiney's "heroic struggle" for an Irish Republic' (Sweeney, 1993: 429). Confronted with mounting domestic and international pressure, the government performed a volte-face when it decided to release MacSwiney, despite professing, only weeks earlier, their intransigence vis-a-vis hunger strikers' demands. MacSwiney, along with her female counterparts in the Cumann, effectively conveyed to an international audience the political expediency encapsulated within the act of self-immolation. However, when the prisoners in the Maze undertook a hunger strike in 1981, the IRA leadership duly informed the women that their participation in a hunger strike in solidarity with their male counterparts in the Maze would lessen its political impact.

Notwithstanding the attention given in feminist scholarship to female political prisoners' participation in prison campaigns, such as during internment in the early 1970s and in the period following the ending of Special Category Status in 1976, mainstream historical discourse has consistently underplayed the significant contributions of women to activities related to the nationalist and republican struggle for Irish independence and unity.<sup>5</sup> The widely acclaimed historical survey of the key events in the conflict, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, does not include even a one-line mention of the political protests performed by women prisoners in Armagh jail in opposition to criminalization (McKittrick and McVea, 2001). Feminist activist and writer Margaretta D'Arcy cites the historical neglect of women prisoners' involvement in political activities as a motivation for writing a book on the subject, she writes in her preface: 'And since so few books have been written about Irish women's experiences as political prisoners over the last two centuries, I felt it essential to put down my own small experience with all its limitations' (D'Arcy, 1981: 13). She also

points out how the media too contributed to the relative invisibility of women political prisoners during the troubles: 'Under the Stormont government women were constantly interned, but never in large numbers, and by comparison with male internees they obtained very little publicity' (D'Arcy, 1981: 11). Today, even the CAIN (Conflict on the Internet) website, an authoritative resource on the history of the troubles, pays no reference to the prison protests carried out by women in Armagh prison during the 1970s and 1980s in its chronology or in its summary of the hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981. Nor is there, as of yet, any reference to the demonstrations organized through the Relatives Action Committee against the ending of Special Category Status for political prisoners, a political campaign that was 'unique in nationalist history in that it was the only mass organisation started and led almost exclusively by women'<sup>6</sup> (Fairweather et al., 1984: 50). While the Relatives Action Committee demonstrates that female republicans did on occasion mobilize political support for the republican movement, unlike their counterparts in the Maze, whose hunger strike the media transformed into a 'spectacle of starving flesh' (Ellmann, 1993: 14), their comparative invisibility in domestic and global media precluded the accrual of symbolic effects around their acts of political resistance.<sup>7</sup> As a film based exclusively on women political prisoners, *Silent Grace* potentially compensates for certain blind spots in the historical narratives and images of the period; from a more pessimistic perspective, however, the film's visual and narrative strategies or 'fetishisms' perpetuate the invisibility of the Armagh women's suffering, resistance and powers of endurance.

#### POPULAR HISTORY: THE HUNGER STRIKES AND DOCUDRAMA

The iconicity and public renown of the men who partook in the 1980/1 hunger strikes did not lessen the challenges inherent in their representation, as demonstrated in two feature films: *Some Mother's Son*, which was released in the immediate aftermath of the IRA ceasefires in 1994, and *H3*, which appeared contemporaneously to *Silent Grace* in a post-conflict context. As opposing cinematic treatments of a common historical subject, they reflect 'the limits of the sayable' (Butler, 2004: xvii) at their respective moments of production. *H3*'s screenplay was co-written by Laurence McKeown, a veteran of the 1981 hunger strike, and Brian Campbell, who in 1986 was sentenced to 15 years in the Maze for his involvement in IRA activities. A low-budget, art-house style film, viewers are encouraged to sympathize with the hunger strikers and to associate the iconicity of their suffering with Christian sacrifice. The appearance of a film with similar thematic and visual motifs would have been unlikely during the 'troubles',

considering the extent to which a censorship culture allied to censorship laws in the Republic of Ireland and in the UK circumscribed cultural production. David Butler gives a pessimistic account of broadcasting culture in Northern Ireland during these years, he writes:

In general, coverage of Northern Ireland displays a depressing dependence on second-hand motifs, visual and thematic, which mars all but the most painstaking and imaginative representations. And this is also the root of the problem for broadcasters, the makers of fiction and documentary films and academic analysis alike: how does one go about representing 'culture and identity in Northern Ireland' in ways which avoid depoliticizing their seamier aspects while at the same time not falling into the trap of reliance on cliché. (Butler, 1995: 44)

Butler's observations point towards the governmental restrictions inhibiting the media from acknowledging the political conflict. Considering its audiovisual heritage, then, *H3* is relatively original in the way that it addresses the suffering endured by the hunger strikers.

By contrast, and more in keeping with Butler's comment, *Some Mother's Son's* adoption of a clichéd narrative format depoliticizes the historical reality of the hunger strikes. Unlike *H3*, which appeared subsequent to the cementing of peace in Northern Ireland, *Some Mother's Son* was released in the immediate aftermath of the IRA ceasefires in 1994, and preceded the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, by two years.<sup>8</sup> *Some Mother's Son*, a perennial story of female friendship, resembles a 'screen memory' in so far as it occludes the men who participated in the 1981 hunger strikes in the Maze prison from view. Although critical responses to *Some Mother's Son* were divided, the considerable box office success that it enjoyed suggests that in contrast to post-conflict appetites for 'real history', the limits of the 'sayable' and the public mood at this stage of the peace process favoured 'well-meaning' political films.

In interviews with the press, *Silent Grace's* director, Maeve Murphy, spoke about her aim of universalizing the story of the women hunger strikers as a motivation for making the film, stating that she 'wanted to humanise these women and show that in a situation of total deprivation, human beings endeavour to retain their dignity' (Cantacuzino, 2004). While the film succeeds very well, as a universal story about human dignity in difficult circumstances, the fading out of history gives way to a type of Hollywood melodrama ill-suited to the accurate portrayal of events taken from history. In a discussion of *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1993), *In the Name of the Father* (dir. Jim Sheridan, 1994) and *JFK* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1991), Steve Lipkin identifies how they adhere to a style of narrative common to the docudrama that 'foregrounds dramatic codes, assuming melodrama's larger function of emphatically clarifying a broad

moral system through domestic imagery' (Lipkin, 1999: 370–1). Lipkin's comments are apt with regard to how in *Silent Grace* the campaigns of political protest undertaken by the 'Armagh women' appear as one-dimensional backdrops to the various other domestic dramas unfolding inside the prison and that serve to display the women's moral fibre. In a similar manner, although the narrative privileges female characters, the incorporation of the stereotypical cinematic subjectivity afforded female characters in mainstream fiction relegates to the film's back-story the historical personages on whose story of imprisonment the film is based. The hardships of prison protests are almost incidental to the progress of the narrative trajectory, whose movement forwards is predicated principally on the developing relationship between two of the prisoners: Eileen and teenager Áine. As events in the film world unfold, Eileen – the IRA woman – becomes a surrogate mother to teenager Áine – the rebel-without-a-cause, who has been imprisoned for joyriding. The clichéd journey of mother and daughter united in a story of interpersonal aggrandisement displaces the historical issue of female republican resistance, which becomes the mere binding agent in the relationship that develops between the two inmates.

As mentioned earlier, *Silent Grace*'s emphasis on female friendship and incorporation of romantic love to conceal the hardships of prison life correlate to Santner's definition of 'narrative fetishism'. For instance, through a number of dream sequences, the viewer is privy to the leading protagonist Eileen's lonesome longings for her ex-boyfriend, a member of the IRA. In so far as these dream sequences provide access to Eileen's cinematic subjectivity, the viewer learns little about her political loyalties. Later, in an unlikely scenario, Cunningham – the prison governor – informs Eileen that he has dreamed about her. The three characters are positioned in a love triangle, in which tainted and forbidden love weigh equally. The sexual tension between the two 'romantic leads' – mediated through the tender remarks and gestures that Cunningham addresses to Eileen, and her spoken and behavioural responses to his overtures – dissolves the political tension between the prisoners and prison staff alluded to in the film and described more explicitly in historical accounts. Furthermore, Eileen's cinematic subjectivity as a desired object and desiring subject is linked more to the world of romance than to politics. The cinematic territory occupied here is far from a politically, or historically, engaged one, and the developing relationship between Eileen and Cunningham unravels in a fashion typical of many romantic dramas in the Hollywood mould.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of critical responses to *Silent Grace* described the film as a human interest rather than historical story. Both positive and negative reviews of *Silent Grace* on the IMDB (Internet



Movie Data Base) note how the film showed the 'human' as opposed to the political face of the protesters and prison authorities, with the distinction that for one group this constituted its greatest strength, and for the other, its biggest weakness (IMDB, 2008). None of these reviews imbue the film with historical gravity, and subsequently, it acquires a 'socio-discursive profile' as, at best, a 'well-meaning' film.<sup>9</sup> The comments of a reviewer of an Oscar-winning film about the secret police – or Stasi, as they were known in the former German Democratic Republic – titled *The Lives of Others* (dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006) correspond to responses to *Silent Grace*, with the distinction that the reviewer of the German film berates the audience, whom he accuses of complicity with the film's disservice to history. Richard Porton writes:

Given the runaway success of *The Lives of Others* (even commended by Christa Wolf herself), it's possible to wonder if movie audiences really have a desire to come to terms with the unsettling recent past. Part of the problem is that filmgoers attend well-meaning political movies to experience an odd sort of moral absolution. (Porton, 2007)

Contrary to the critical anxieties stemming from the production and consumption of films loosely based on past events, such as *Silent Grace* and *The Lives of Others*, reviews in the UK and Irish print media of three docudramas dealing with historical trauma in the Northern Irish, context and produced more or less contemporaneously to *Silent Grace* – *Omagh* (2005), *Bloody Sunday* (2002) and *Sunday* (2002) – interpreted the films as extensions of historical discourse and praised their appeal as such to audiences. Arguably, then, at the time of its release, *Silent Grace's* demotion of history to back-story was out of step with its audiences' desires to revisit history. While the historical integrity of the above films was by no means unquestioned by critics, there was a consensus among many of the positive reviews that the films were progressive in making the 'truth' about the past available to the larger public in Northern Ireland and its neighbouring jurisdictions. Without sharing a uniform aesthetic, these films 'argue with the seriousness of documentary' (Lipkin, 1999: 371) to convey viewers into historical worlds. As in convincing examples of the docudrama, in Steve Lipkin's words, 'The viewer is invited to accept the argument that re-creation warrants, that what we see might have "really" happened in "much this way" ' (Lipkin, 1999: 372). Notwithstanding the irony that the historical credibility of these films relies entirely upon artifice, owing to their sociodiscursive profiles as memory work, *Omagh*, *Bloody Sunday* and, maybe to a lesser extent, *Sunday* can be situated towards the factual end 'of a spectrum that runs from journalistic to relevant drama with infinite gradations along the way' (Woodhead, 1999: 103).

## SILENT ABJECTION AND NARRATIVE GRACE

The conspicuous scarcity of visual references in *Silent Grace* to the historical reality of prison life for female republican prisoners is borne out in a number of scenes set in the prison governor's office that show Eileen engaged in heated discussions with the governor regarding living conditions in the prison. While Eileen's spirited arguments, which allow her to verbalize her objections – the inadequacy of an hour's daily exercise granted political prisoners, and the dehumanizing aspects of being confined to a prison cell for the remaining 23 hours in the day with restricted access to toilet facilities – speak of prison life, there is a distinct lack of informative or historically credible images of women's suffering in Armagh jail. According to historical sources, women in Armagh prison were reduced to living in conditions of abject squalor on occasions such as when they were denied the opportunity to 'slop out', and cavities, such as windows and the peepholes, through which prisoners attempted to empty their chamber pots, were sealed up (McCafferty, 1981: 9). Authorities in the Maze and Armagh went beyond excluding republican prisoners from the political order, even more drastically, from an ontological perspective, their strategies of subjugation excluded prisoners from a social, or human, order.

Sanitary conditions in the women's prison invoke the notion of the abject as theorized by Julia Kristeva. Compare her description of the abject as 'those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*' (Kristeva, 1982: 12–13) to D'Arcy's analogy of her cell – strewn with the detritus of hair, flaking skin and discarded nails – to a 'rat's nest' (D'Arcy, 1981: 81). For Kristeva, if the imperative act of excluding the abject object is not accomplished, the border between identity and non-identity will be disrupted: 'Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death' (Kristeva, 1997: 260). In the Northern Ireland context, by restricting republican prisoners' access to toilet facilities and boarding up cavities in their cells, the authorities prevented prisoners from excluding the abject object. The prisoners who eventually embraced the abject in their subscription to the no-wash campaign, followed by the dirty protest, positively exploited their defilement to destabilize the mechanisms of discipline and punishment in the prisons.

While the aesthetic strategies in *H3* occasionally construct a notion of the abject in this Kristevan sense, *Silent Grace* provides considerably less visual evidence of either the abjection to which, historically, female prisoners were subjected, or of the abjection that they visited upon themselves. Although Eileen complains about the living conditions in the prison, the *mise en scène* of the prison cells is entirely inadequate to the

task of visualizing the abjection of which she speaks. Similarly, despite being set during the 'no-wash' campaign of 1980, costuming in the film is inconsistent with how, in journalist Nell McCafferty's words, the prisoners 'changed their clothes once every 3 months, wearing for 90 days at a time the same jeans, sweaters, and underwear' (McCafferty, 1981: 10). Likewise, although a prison officer exiting one of the prison cells muttering 'filthy pigs' refers to the abjection to which, prior to the dirty protest, the women were subjected, his words ring hollow, since they are neither doubled on the level of performance nor *mise en scène*.

While admittedly, the task of visualizing the dirty protest challenges the limits of cinematic representation, its cursory treatment in two short scenes, and the absence of any reference, visual or verbal, to the distinctiveness of the women's dirty protest, i.e. the wiping of menstrual fluids on the walls of the cells, and to the types of health risks – such as sterility – faced by women protestors, is surely a disservice to and misrepresentation of the history of political prisoners who participated in these campaigns of resistance.<sup>10</sup> In one scene, which is focalized through the apolitical teenager Áine, the protest figures less as a narrative focus and more as a point of entry into the scene's representation of the growing bond between Eileen and Áine. To Áine, Eileen's participation in the protest is incomprehensible, and it is presented as an obstacle to be overcome so that the relationship between the two women can develop: when Áine enters the cell she shares with Eileen and sees a wall smeared in her cellmate's excrement, she vomits all over herself and expresses her disgust at Eileen's actions. As the scene unfolds, however, Eileen manages to cajole Áine into joining the protest. Importantly, Áine's acquiescence with Eileen's demand to join the women in their protest is configured in relation to personal rather than republican politics. Furthermore, as the relationship between the two women blossoms, there is no evidence that Áine has become politicized, or, even indoctrinated into supporting Irish republicanism. The dirty protest is presented as an object through which Áine, as Eileen's protégé, channels her respect and affection for her role model.

In common with other violations of prisoners – such as the strip searches, for example – that are referred to in dialogue between characters in *Silent Grace*, the physical assault of one of the inmates – Geraldine – by a prison officer is not given pictorial expression. Instead, the incident is conveyed aurally via the prisoners in adjoining cells, who listen to the sounds emanating from the victim's cell, and whose distraught faces register the impact of the blows being administered to Geraldine by her aggressor. While the argument that its representation through imagery would fetishize the naked female body carries weight, its reduction to a passing reference grossly underplays the extraordinarily negative impact of this practice, and its abuse, on women prisoners in Armagh. As the scene progresses, Geraldine's anguished screams answer Eileen's distressed

pleas to the Virgin Mary, and her frantic recitation of the Hail Mary. Some scenes later, it is revealed that Cunningham – the prison governor – has dismissed the offending officer. In this way, the narrative economy presents the beating as an isolated incident of violence, and exception to regular prison codes of conduct. Subsequently, the documented systematic abuses of women in Armagh prison during the troubles are grossly underplayed.

During Eileen's hunger strike, the filmic strategy integrates some of the generic patterns of romantic drama to represent Cunningham's distress over Eileen's participation in a hunger strike, such that his romantic feelings for Eileen are privileged over the women's suffering. When he tries to dissuade Eileen from continuing her strike by reminding her of her approaching release date, his body language betrays his emotional investment in her health and happiness. His objections to the hunger strike are expressed on very few occasions, such as when he depoliticizes it by comparing it to an act of suicide, more often, his efforts to halt the strike derive from his personal concern for Eileen. Such is his concern, he even arranges a meeting in a Catholic church with a priest where they discuss a possible way out of the impasse, and, of course, their conversation centres on Eileen's individual welfare. Off-centred point of view zooms of some of the religious icons decorating the church convey Cunningham's discomfort in alien surrounds, where he has ventured for the sake of his love object – Eileen. In a later scene depicting Eileen at the peak of her hunger strike, Cunningham confesses to her that she has appeared in his dreams. Far from presenting Cunningham's 'love' as unrequited, Eileen later confesses to Áine that from when she entered the prison and saw Cunningham, she had been attracted to him. The representation of the unlikely couple here obscures the hunger strikers' physical deterioration from view, and assures viewers that love will in time conquer all. As the unlikely couple, Eileen and Cunningham provide a variation on the familiar trope of 'love across the sectarian divide', which frequently features in dramas set during the Northern Ireland conflict. In the case of Eileen and Cunningham, multiple divides – institutional, national and ideological – separate them. However, like the 'love across the sectarian divide' films, made predominantly during the troubles, that dramatize love at the expense of simplifying the divide, here, political realities are a backdrop to the unlikely couple's romantic entanglement.

*Silent Grace* draws to its conclusion with the ending of the women's hunger strike, brought about when Cunningham enacts the 'Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act', more commonly referred to as 'the Cat and Mouse Act'. Introduced as a counter-measure against the hunger strikes organized by the suffragette women's movement in 1913, 'the Cat and Mouse Act' enables prison authorities to release prisoners who have reached a terminal stage in their hunger strike. In a further

elaboration of a 'chase' motif enacted by the 'romantic leads' at various other stages of the film, Cunningham, in the role of 'the cat', chases Eileen, and the other women, until they concede victory to him. Although historical evidence suggests that relations between the women in Armagh and prison authorities were far from amicable at this point in their campaign, Cunningham's relations with the prisoners are represented in a positive light. When he shows charity towards the women, viewers are encouraged to identify with him: after being informed that the prisoners are dancing around their cells in celebration of Áine's release the following day, he appears mildly amused, and has no objections to their enjoyment. Moreover, when a prison guard suggests that the prisoners should be reprimanded for their behaviour, he countermands: 'if they want to dance, let them'.

In one of the film's closing scenes, Eileen enjoys a shower and happily washes away the traces of political protest. Given the symbolic associations of water with notions of regeneration and absolution, the conclusion of the protests is presented as a positive turning point in Eileen's story. When Áine enquires of Eileen if she plans, in time, to resume political protest, her reticence speaks volumes. Correspondingly, Áine's rebellious energies have been tamed by the film's close. Whereas in an early scene, she gives Cunningham the middle finger, in the film's ultimate scene, she blows him an affectionate kiss as she exits the gates of the prison. By linking Eileen and Áine's personal transformations to Cunningham's benevolent interventions, the female characters are deprived by the filmic narrative of agency, which in reality they ably demonstrated by resisting subjugation by the forces of the state.

## CONCLUSION

Given its generic recipe and the politics of its imagery – arguably, there are no convincing images of the material effects of the prison protests on prisoners' bodies, or their surroundings – *Silent Grace* is poorly disposed to the production of the historical memory of the political resistance performed by female republican prisoners in Armagh jail from the late 1970s into the early 1980s. It should be acknowledged, however, that budgetary constraints undoubtedly contributed to its lack of visual fluency, and to its shortage of extras to represent the 30 prisoners who joined the no-wash protest – in the film, we see only four prisoners. Without minimizing the impediments of a low budget, *Silent Grace's* 'narrative fetishism' or adherence to the narrative patterns of a Hollywood-style feature film effectively erase the historical reality and specificity of the women prisoners' campaigns in Armagh jail.

Although *Silent Grace* did not share the advantages of films such as *Omagh* and *Bloody Sunday*, which enjoyed dual television transmission

and theatrical exhibition, film scholar John Hill includes it in his discussion of these films, which, he argues, 'do not simply contribute to the "healing" process that accompanies "peace" but also participate in the continuing symbolic struggle over the representation of the past and the meanings that should be attached to it in the present' (Hill, 2006: 241–2). Hill rightly commends the production of such films in the first place in the context of their discursive contributions to a post-conflict society attempting to come to terms with its recent and troubled past. However, although a daring cinematic enterprise, given its difficult and challenging subject matter, *Silent Grace's* overreliance on the melodramatic conventions of fiction film unhinges its relationship to the past. Unlike other historically credible docudramas dealing with Northern Ireland's recent past, *Silent Grace* does not construct a sense of authenticity, credibility or immediacy at the level of imagery or performance. Moreover, its narrative economy reinforces its distance from history and its proximity to mainstream fiction film. In these ways, *Silent Grace's* modes of address assume that for viewers in Northern Ireland the recent past is too painful to directly engage with, and accordingly, it supplies them with an entertaining mode of 'history', or 'fetishism'.

Recent objections in moderate nationalist and unionist political circles to Sinn Féin's proposal that a commemorative event be held in the Long Gallery in Stormont for Mairead Farrell – an IRA member who was imprisoned in Armagh jail from 1976 to 1986, during which time she instigated a dirty protest and went on hunger strike, and was eventually shot by the SAS (the British Army special forces unit) in Gibraltar in 1988 – reflect, paradoxically, both the persistence of the state's patrolling of the past in Northern Ireland and the democratization of that past.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of whether this commemorative event takes place or of its ethical sagacity, the fact alone of its mooted by Sinn Féin, and of the DUP's counter-suggestion that a similar event honour members of the SAS who died on duty in the North, demonstrate the enhanced possibilities in post-conflict Northern Ireland to initiate and participate in public acts of remembrance, as compared to the policing of public grief during the troubles. Writing in the field of memory studies, Sue Campbell describes the indivisibility of a given utterance from its intended audience, noting 'the presence of listeners who "cue" or prompt certain ways of remembering the past'. She goes on to remark that 'Wertsch says "it is, after all, standard practice to formulate what we say in anticipation of who the listeners might be"' (Campbell, 2008: 41–8). Given the pervasiveness of narrative pleasures, fetishisms and panaceas in *Silent Grace*, its address to viewers enacts a presumption that they have little desire in 'properly' remembering historical trauma. 'Cued' by its intended audience, *Silent Grace* functions more as an act of forgetting than of remembering the prison protests of female republican prisoners in Armagh jail.

## NOTES

1. Both government legislation and intimidation, in the UK and in the Irish Republic, prevented the national broadcasters from performing in the role of an independent media sector for the duration of the Northern Irish troubles. The British broadcasting ban forbade television and radio from broadcasting interviews with members of proscribed paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, as well as representatives of Sinn Féin. The restrictions placed on the broadcast media have been widely considered as the most stringent since the Second World War. However, the ban served not to impose but to reinforce censorship, since broadcasting organizations had, since the eruption of violence in the 1970s, been operating according to a culture of self-censorship, and had rarely carried interviews with any of the proscribed organizations. In the Irish Republic, on 1 October 1971, the then Taoiseach Jack Lynch issued the first directive under Section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Act 1960, which allowed the government to prevent RTE (Radio Telefís Éireann) from broadcasting anything that could be seen to communicate the aims of organizations that 'engage in, promote, encourage or advocate the attaining of any political objective by violent means'. In 1972, all nine members of the RTE Authority were dismissed following the broadcast of a report based on an interview by one of its journalists with a member of the IRA. In 1988, a radio presenter on *Morning Ireland* was dismissed for breach of trust by infringing the 1976 directive of Section 31 (RTE, 2008).
2. William Whitelaw introduced Special Category Status in 1972 in an effort to defuse a threatened hunger strike by IRA prisoners. He would later recant Special Status as a mistake since it attributed political status to the IRA (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 137).
3. The phrase 'on the blanket protest' refers to when, beginning on 15 September 1976, republican prisoners refused to wear the prison uniform, choosing instead to enwrap themselves in their blankets. By 1979, almost a third of republican prisoners had joined the blanket protest. David McKittrick and David McVea describe the genesis and evolution of the dirty protest:

The no wash protest quickly became the 'dirty protest' with the remains of food and the overflowing chamber pots left in cells. Soon the protest was again escalated, prisoners spreading their excrement on cell walls. As conditions reached dangerous levels with maggot infestations and the threat of disease, the prison authorities forcibly removed prisoners to allow cells to be steam-cleaned with special equipment. The prison authorities responded with forcible baths, shaves and haircuts of protesting prisoners. (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 140)

4. The 1980/1 hunger strikes were motivated by five demands that were deemed necessary by the prisoners to reinstate their political status. These demands were as follows: the right not to wear prison uniforms; the right not to do prison work; free association for political prisoners; educational, recreational and visiting facilities; and full restoration of remission.
5. In *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women in Irish Nationalism*, Margaret Ward (1996) discusses the importance of the role played by three pivotal Irish nationalist women's organizations in the struggle for Irish independence as a corrective to their sidelining in Irish history books. These are: the Ladies Land League, Inghinidhe na hÉireann and Cumann na mBan. Nell

McCafferty published one of the first book-length treatments of the plight of women political prisoners in Armagh jail during the political protests against the end of Special Category Status in 1976. Nell McCafferty (1981), theatre maker, and political activist Margaretta D'Arcy chose to spend three months in Armagh jail with 30 republican women prisoners on the no-wash protest rather than pay a fine for protesting against conditions in the women's prison in Armagh on International Women's Day 1979 (D'Arcy, 1981). *Only the Rivers Run Free: Northern Ireland: The Women's War* sets out the material and cultural impact of the troubles on the lives of women living in urban Northern Ireland (Fairweather et al., 1984).

6. Although the CAIN website does not list the contributions of women political prisoners in the pages relating specifically to the hunger strikes, a section titled 'Key Issues – Women and the Northern Irish Conflict' is currently being compiled: [cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/women/women.htm](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/women/women.htm) (accessed 22 January 2008).
7. Although many Irish feminists were reluctant to support the women in Armagh, because of their identity as militant republicans, and their activities were underreported by the media, there was immense support for the women both internationally and at home. Describing a women's conference in Copenhagen, Margaretta D'Arcy states how there were hundreds of women in attendance there from 'Latin America, the Third World, and Europe . . . supporting the Armagh prisoners, seeing them as feminists and freedom fighters. *Scarlet Women*, *Spare Rib*, and the *Irish Times* opened their columns to the big debate. At every women's conference in Dublin the issue was raised' (D'Arcy, 1981: 120–1).
8. The Good Friday Agreement's endorsement by people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in referendums on 22 May 1998 provided a historic breakthrough in Anglo-Irish and North–South relations. The Agreement enshrines the special constitutional status of Northern Ireland by recognizing the legitimacy of seeking a United Ireland and, at the same time, the present wish of the majority of people in Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. The principle of consent is central to the Agreement's wording, as evidenced in the following extract: 'it is for the people of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a United Ireland, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland' (Department of Foreign Affairs web pages, 'The Good Friday Agreement'; at: [www.dfa.ie/home/index.aspx?id=335](http://www.dfa.ie/home/index.aspx?id=335) [accessed 1 July 2008]).
9. Writing for *The Observer*, Philip French says that *Silent Grace* is 'well-meaning, but throws no new light on the Troubles' (French, 2004). Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* announces his verdict: 'it didn't quite work for me, largely because of its stage origins and the fact that the women look too fresh-faced and relaxed in their body language to be involved in dirty protests and hunger strikes' (Bradshaw, 2004). Jamie Russell (2004), writing for the BBC website, sets out the crux of his opinion by stating: 'While director Maeve Murphy should be applauded for alerting us to the way in which the contribution of female political prisoners to the Republican struggle has been marginalised in the Irish history books, her one-sided storytelling and paper-thin characterisation is less praiseworthy. In *The Name of the Mother* this certainly isn't.' Other positive reviews reflect a different critical perspective to that held in this article. For these reviewers, the film's attention to friendship at



- the expense of political history is a virtue. All of these reviews are posted on the IMDB website (IMDB, 2008).
10. Kristeva argues that while the abject always relates 'to corporeal orifices as to so many landmarks parceling-constituting the body's territory . . . polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to the borders of the body, have any polluting value' (Kristeva, 1982: 71).
  11. SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) member of the Legislative Assembly Declan O'Loan condemned Sinn Féin's suggestion that Mairead Farrell be commemorated, and the DUP's (Democratic Unionist Party) counter-suggestion of a ceremony honouring the deaths of members of the SAS while on service in Northern Ireland. For O'Loan, granting recognition to controversial deaths is inappropriate in the context of a transitional society emerging from a period of protracted political violence (see SDLP, 2008).

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Aileen Blaney has a PhD in film studies from Trinity College Dublin, where she also taught on a wide range of related courses. Her previous publications investigate the contributions of docudramas concerned with Northern Ireland's 'troubles' to the sphere of public history in a post-conflict society. Her current research considers the relevance of a perceived 'ethical turn' in contemporary popular history to the treatment of historical suffering in television programming and film production in the Northern Irish context. [email: [blaneya@tcd.ie](mailto:blaneya@tcd.ie)]

